

Decision Notice  
and  
Finding of No Significant Impact  
for  
Region One Hazard Tree and Forest Management  
Environmental Assessment

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks  
Region 1  
490 N. Meridian  
Kalispell, MT 59901

September 3, 2003

Description of the Proposed Action:

The proposed action is to develop a standardized approach to forest management, setting direction for the level and type of public involvement before actions are taken. In addition, FWP wishes to adopt the "Vegetation and Hazard Tree Management" recommendations written by Forester Fred Hodgeboom in order to establish a framework under which to manage their forest properties. The recommendations for actions therein were based on analysis of climax habitat type suitable for particular areas and recognition of FWP's desire to protect wildlife habitat while protecting people involved in recreational activities on lands managed by FWP. Primary consideration was given to recreational values such as aesthetics, visitor safety, limiting noise during peak seasons, minimizing resource disturbance, and protection or enhancement of wildlife values. While fire suppression is not a primary objective, FWP does recognize the need to reduce fuel loads in order to avoid catastrophic fires that would impact public land and adjacent private property. Other goals considered in reaching these recommendations were achieving/maintaining a variety of age classes, protecting old growth trees when possible, and reduction of disease and insect infestations.

The proposed action is to adopt the preferred alternative, which will include the following:

As part of the effort to reach the goals stated above, certain actions would be taken in the harvest of any tree:

1. When possible, stumps would be cut to ground height in order to avoid tripping hazards and to have less impact on the aesthetics of an area when a harvest is completed.
2. Management actions would be done during the off-season (October – April) to avoid noise during the peak recreation season. Immediate safety concerns from hazardous trees would be the exception.
3. All treatments will be done in winter to lessen ground disturbance, unless the treatment is specifically chosen for interpretation and education, or an exception is needed to achieve a specific forest-related goal.
4. Equipment used in any harvest operation will be appropriate for the size of the harvest, but chosen to leave the smallest possible impacts on the understory when the project is completed.
5. To minimize aesthetic impacts, trees to be left would be marked in one of three ways:

- a. Flagged, with the flags removed after harvest.
  - b. Tagged at the base of the tree.
  - c. Painted. If paint is used, the trees will be repainted brown when the treatment is completed.
6. Slash will be piled and burned, with the remaining debris buried, or chipped and scattered.

**Routine maintenance and removal of risk trees as needed:** Removal of individual diseased or dying trees and removal of hazardous trees are maintenance activities that will be done on an “as needed basis.” A tree will be removed if it is determined to be diseased, based on physical deformities, crown health, or symptoms of insect or disease. A tree is deemed to be “hazardous” if it is determined that it poses a safety risk to the public or facilities. A tree may be healthy but hazardous (if leaning over a campsite), or diseased but not hazardous (if it falls it has no human or structural target). *Detection and Correction of Hazard Trees in Washington’s Recreation Areas* will be used as a guiding document for hazardous tree removal. No public notification or involvement will be sought unless hazardous or diseased tree removal involves more than 5% of the trees on a site. If more than 5% of the trees on a site are deemed to be in need of removal, public notification through legal advertisements and the FWP Internet site will be done.

**Group Selection Harvest (<10 acres/3 years):** Protect and reproduce ponderosa pine by harvesting encroaching trees for 75-150 feet around existing maternal trees. Treat 10 acres or less per site, with treatments scheduled no more frequently than once every 3 years. Public notification through legal advertisements and the FWP Internet site will be done.

**Pre-Commercial Thinning (<10 acres/5 years):** Pre-commercial thinning of dense sapling stands to release ponderosa and larch. Trees that are taken are usually no more than five inches in diameter and, while they can be sold for chip, have no commercial value as lumber. FWP would treat no more than 10 acres per site, with treatment frequency at no more than one treatment every 5 years. A forester will be hired to design this type of project. Wildlife biologists will be involved in the design of the project. A walk-through of the project will be held for the public, with public notification through the news media, legal advertisements, and the FWP Internet site. A 30-day public comment period will be held, and the project adjusted accordingly.

**Pre-Commercial Thinning (>10 acres/5 years):** Pre-commercial thinning of dense sapling stands to release ponderosa and larch on larger parcels. Trees that are taken are usually no more than five inches in diameter and, while they can be sold for chip, have no commercial value as lumber. A forester will be hired to design the project, and an environmental assessment will be completed, along with required public notification and comment period. The amount of land to be treated and the frequency of treatment would be determined by the forester hired to design the project based on the goals for each site. It is anticipated that this type of pre-commercial thinning project will occur in conjunction with some commercial thinning to help offset overall costs.

**Commercial Thinning:** Commercial thinning of dense stands to average 25 feet of spacing is recommended at some sites. A forester will be hired to design the project, and an environmental assessment will be completed, along with required public notification and comment period. The amount of land to be treated and the frequency of treatment would be based on specific project goals and determined by the forester hired to design the project, in

consultation with a wildlife biologist. Generally, no more than 50 acres per site would be treated, with a rotation of 3-to-5 years between entries.

Pre-commercial and commercial thinning projects would be coordinated among sites to achieve economies of scale. It is anticipated that projects would include more than one site being treated at a time to reduce costs. Any revenues generated above the cost of replanting and rehabilitation of the landscape would go into the Real Property Trust Account. Interest from that account can be spent as authorized by the legislature.

#### Public Comment:

Thirty-day internal and 30-day external comment periods were held. A walk-through was scheduled at Wayfarers State Park, and an open house was held in Kalispell. Two people attended the walk-through, while there was no attendance at the open house in Kalispell. E-mails were sent to individuals who have shown interest in parks projects in the past, and to the Department of State Lands. News releases were sent and legal advertisements placed in local newspapers, and the document was available on the FWP web site.

Two written comments were received during the external review process. One questioned the age of the references used by the forester hired to complete this project; the other stated they favored the preferred alternative, but had several recommendations on the text, and questioned why the wildlife management areas were not included in this document. Edits were done to the document to address those concerns regarding removing stumps at ground level and noxious weed control.

#### Finding of No Significant Impact:

Based on the analysis in the environmental assessment (EA), I find Alternative 3, adopting the recommendations from the forester, with the public notification process outlined above, to be the preferred alternative. I have evaluated the EA and applicable laws, regulations, and policies and have determined that this action will not have a significant effect on the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

The final environmental assessment and the FONSI may be viewed at or obtained from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Region One, 490 N. Meridian, Kalispell, MT 59901. Please direct requests and questions to:

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Daniel P. Vincent  
Regional Supervisor

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Date